

## **Wheat and Chaff 12/4/22**

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

Doesn't that just give you the Christmas spirit? Make you want to decorate your house and shop for presents? Doesn't it bring out all the feelings of warmth in your heart when welcoming a baby into the world or gathering a family around a table?

Perhaps not. The mood of Advent is a mix of anticipation and penitence - and both of those are at odds with the way the rest of the world is getting ready for Christmas. And I don't have a problem with that - Advent is a season in our faith tradition that I welcome anyone to observe, but it isn't everyone's tradition.

What does get me every year is the juxtaposition of joy and judgment. Remembering the coming of the Christ child while also holding up the expectation of his coming again. It can be jarring - maybe it is supposed to be.

John's rant by the river Jordan is not what any one of us would put on a holiday card, but penitence is a central theme of Advent. It is one of the ways we prepare for Christ and for the kingdom. It is one of the ways we prepare the way of the Lord.

Sometimes these messages urging repentance give us a feeling that through it people are being separated - good from bad, righteous from unrighteous. That might certainly be the case when we hear John say that Christ's "winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

You definitely don't want to be the chaff in that metaphor, even if you aren't quite sure what will happen to the wheat in the granary. The chaff will be burned, annihilated.

But what if the choice before us is not whether we are wheat or chaff? What if the process is not one of separating people from each other? What if the repentance John is calling us to is a change in ourselves? A process of bringing each and every one of us closer to the God who created and loves us?

I have to admit up front that I am a big fan of wheat - and other grains, too. Not only because it is the heart of some of my favorite foods, but also because it is truly at the root of civilization as we know and experience it. It was the growing and harvesting of grain that led humans to settle into villages, waiting out the year that it took for grain to be planted, sprout, grow, be harvested, and then be made into food. And it could be stored! You could benefit from the fruit of your grain harvest for months, years even.

What we make from grain - bread - has become the heart of family and community life in cultures around the world. When we are at peace with each other, we break bread together. In fact, the word "meal" means grain.

Bread, of course, is a central image in our weekly worship - the bread of life broken for us, blessed on this altar and shared. We become that bread, are unified in that bread.

Grain is a powerful image of growth, creativity, and connection in our faith tradition.

And then there is chaff. What even is chaff?! Since most of us are not farmers, I'm assuming that, like me, you aren't really too sure what chaff is. Except that it gets burned.

Well, thanks to the Internet, now I do know about chaff, what it is and why it might be a good image for what happens when we repent.

Grains like wheat, rice, barley, and oats are enclosed with a husk that is tough and inedible. That is the chaff. To get to the heart of the grain, the part we use for food, you have to remove the chaff. This is done by threshing and winnowing.

Threshing involves pounding the grain to loosen the husks. Once the chaff is loosened, the grain is winnowed by tossing it in the air. The chaff is light enough to be blown away in a light wind, while the heart of the grain is captured as it falls to the ground or into a basket. A winnowing fork is used to toss the grain into the air so that the chaff and the wheat can be separated.

Now, it is interesting to note that every grain of wheat - or rice or oats - every one has chaff. If you look at the window here in our worship space, you can see the shape of the wheat. Each "spike" has a cluster of grains, and each grain has chaff around it. So when you separate wheat from chaff, you are not separating two different things ( like sheep from goats), you are separating a covering from each thing.

As an image of repentance this is lovely - repentance is removing the things from your own life that separate you from God. It is preparing yourself to be useful for the work of God. And the chaff is burned - it is permanently set aside.

Instead of an image of destruction, this image of repentance as separating wheat from chaff now looks like a process that includes growth, hard work, and a breath of spirit to bring each grain - each one of us - to our fullest potential as God's creatures.

If we think about repentance as shedding the things in our lives that separate us from God, it feels less like guilt and more like freedom. Less like separation from others and more like unity and community.

So, what is the chaff for you? What keeps you from being in full communion with God and with others? For some gathered at the river to hear John, it was their showy religious practices meant to impress people rather than honor God. For others it was their acts of injustice that went against all they claimed to uphold in their faith. Some of them, and some of us, think heritage or social power will save them.

There are clear cut sins that most of us recognize as “chaff” - things like stealing, cheating, lying, and murdering...but there is also the sin of thinking you are better than someone who has done those things, that you can never fall short. The chaff of noticing the splinter in someone’s eye and not the log in your own.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the sobering and joyful reflection for Advent. We are called to repent because, like grain, we are covered with a rough husk of sin that keeps us from being fully who God created us to be. We repent so that God can remove that chaff and separate it from us. We repent because, like grain, at our core we have what it takes to build community, to make peace. We repent to prepare the way of the Lord, to gather around God’s table and become the bread of heaven, the Body of Christ.

As you come up to the table today for communion, I hope you will take a look at the image of wheat in our window and see in it a bit of yourself and our congregation. See how you have grown, how God has worked in your life, how the Spirit of God has winnowed the chaff away, and how that process helps each and all of us prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen